



Sister Ellen Marie Ryan

July 11, 1932 -- December 19, 2020

William John Ryan was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, but within a few years his parents moved the family, first to Portland OR and then to San Diego CA. He was a young man working for the U.S. Postal Service when he met and married Georgia Marie Ball. Together they found a home just a few blocks from the Academy of Our Lady of Peace, staffed by Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, the same community of William's great-aunts, Sisters Constance Ryan and Sister Mary John Ryan in St. Paul and also of his Los Angeles cousins, Sisters Catherine Anita, Constance and Anne Gertrude, daughters of Anna Ryan Fitzgerald.

William and Georgia welcomed their first child on July 11, 1932 and named her Ellen Marie after her grandmother, Ellen Furlong Ryan, who died shortly after Ellen was born. This very happy baby was the joy of their lives. Georgia became acquainted with the Sisters at the Academy as did toddler, Ellen, who later would tell of her mother's taking her for walks through the campus and teaching her to swim in the pool. It was no surprise at the age of six, she put on the OLP uniform and entered first grade at the Academy.

On November 22, 1940, her sister, Nancy, was born. Her parents told Ellen she was now the big sister and could choose Nancy's middle name. Immediately she wanted it to be Patricia, after Sister Patricia Margaret, her favorite teacher. On July 27, 1943, her brother, William John, arrived to complete the family.

The Academy was almost a second home to Ellen. After completing elementary grades, she continued in the high school, becoming involved not only in academics but also in other activities, including sports: swimming, volleyball and tennis. As one of her classmates mentioned, "Ellen was popular and into everything."

In 1948, her parents bought property and built a new home in La Mesa. Nancy and John attended St. Martin of Tours parish school while Ellen commuted to OLP for her Junior and Senior years, graduating in June 1950.

Although the idea of attending college was enticing to Ellen, she told her parents her real desire was to enter the convent. With two priests and five women religious as family members it was her parents' strong Catholic faith which led them to believe the call to religious life was real in their daughter.

On September 15, 1950, the Ryan family drove Ellen to St. Mary's Academy in Los Angeles and waved their goodbyes as she walked up the front stairs to join forty-nine vivacious young women as they entered to begin their lives as Sisters of St. Joseph. On March 19, 1951, she received the habit and the name Sister Ellen Marie. During the novitiate Ellen missed her family very much. However the Ryan's never missed driving from San Diego for every visiting Sunday. In later years Ellen said she did not realize it at the time, but the good-byes of the visits and watching her family drive away as she turned to walk back to the novitiate, gave her the strength to know that she was where God wanted her to be.

At the end of the novitiate she made first vows at St. Mary's Academy on March 18, 1953; final vows in the Chapel of Mount St. Mary's College, August 15, 1958. She earned both BA and MA degrees at Mount St. Mary's College and also a Secondary Teaching Credential.

Her first years of teaching in parish schools were at St. John the Evangelist, Los Angeles and American Martyrs, Manhattan Beach. To her surprise in August 1957, she was sent to San Diego, to be the Principal of the elementary school and the eighth grade teacher at her Alma Mater. From 1961 to 1974 she taught in Southern and Northern California parish schools, while also serving as vice-principal or principal in three of them.

In 1974, she began her secondary teaching career in the English Department of St. Joseph's High School, Lakewood, CA. After five years at St. Joseph's she again returned to her Alma Mater to spend the rest of her teaching years doing what she loved most of all, teaching English and becoming involved in all the activities at OLP. In the classroom she gave much to her students and expected them to be the "best they could be." One former student said of her, "Sister Ellen Marie was a force of nature. Because of her I became a better writer. She was tough, sassy, challenging...with a very Irish sense of humor."

In 1986 the focus of her ministry changed as she accepted the position of Development Director for St. Vincent's Village, a shelter for the homeless founded by Fr. Joe Carroll, who called her "God sent" as she used her English and writing skills to write grant proposals to countless foundations and corporations. The rapid and generous responses were amazing. Sister Ellen Marie called them "the luck of the Irish" as the contributions continued to grow each year. At the same time she did not forget her teaching skills as she invited former students and others to become volunteers for the Center and guided them as they became involved in so many ways of helping the homeless.

Some of the generous St. Vincent donors knew that Ellen had never experienced travel beyond California. To thank her for all she had done for St. Vincent's they invited her and a sister companion to join them on their trips abroad. She and S. Annette Czuleger traveled through Europe and to Ellen's delight, with one special stop in Shakespeare country. On the last trip they were in Rome as white smoke filtered up to announce Pope Francis' election.

After these experiences Ellen knew she loved to travel, especially to places about which she had only read. She set a goal. Loving all things Irish, even the Fighting Irish of Notre Dame, she wanted to see the birthplace of her great-grandparents. And so it happened. She visited Ireland twice, once with a side trip to Spain.

After leaving her ministry at St. Vincent's in 2002, she returned to OLP as a volunteer tutor, but remained living in the Hayes Avenue Apartment Community, where she had moved in 1997. Her apartment overlooked a deep canyon covered with tall trees through which a cool breeze seemed to find its way through her windows. In the distance she could see Mercy Hospital, where she was born. After many years filled with activities, she was grateful to slow down in this quiet place...often with a resident cat.

Although Ellen kept in touch with her 25 cousins and 12 aunts and uncles during her working years, she hoped to be more present to the San Diego Dibos, Ryan and Vancil families. There were also former students, colleagues and CSJ friends with whom she corresponded. She put her writing and phone skills to good use.

With ageing come other decisions. Ellen too, had to face limits to what had been ordinary activities. Recuperating after falls down the many stairs leading to her apartment, there were limits. For Ellen, who could always do what had to be done, this was not the "live, love, laugh" life she always knew. Needing more assistance for daily living, Ellen moved to Nazareth House in April 2019. Although she missed her Hayes community, she was delighted with her room. Visitors were always welcome.

When the Pandemic arrived and lockdowns were required in congregate living facilities, no visitors were allowed at Nazareth. Packages were left at the front desk, contacts continued by email and phone calls. Ellen responded with her own messages. Isolation was not easy. During early December of 2020, there were changes in Ellen's overall condition. On December 8th she was taken to Mercy Scripps Hospital with breathing problems from COVID-19 and put in ICU. She lingered until the morning of December 19th when she ended her journey on this earth, maybe hearing the whisper "Come now" from the God she had served so well all of her days.

Dear Ellen, we will miss your love and laughter as you lived among us. With words from *Hamlet* we pray, "May flights of angels sing thee to thy rest" in heaven's everlasting peace.

~written by Sister Barbara Dugan, CSJ

